

Fervent Prayer, Session 2: Childlike Praying

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

-Matthew 7:7-11 (ESV)

There is no more familiar example of fervent asking than a child begging her mom or dad to give her something she feels she desperately needs to have right that moment. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus puts his teaching on prayer in the context of the child/parent relationship. Whatever else we may learn about fervent prayer as we grow in the practice of it, we must begin with simple childlike asking. There are certainly legitimate philosophical questions to answer and real-life experiences to consider, but not yet. Fervent prayer begins with and ultimately rests on toddler-like confidence that her parents will give her anything she asks. Paul Miller writes:

To learn to pray is to enter the world of a child, where all things are possible. Little children can't imagine that their parents won't eventually say yes. They know if they keep pestering their parents, they'll eventually give in. Childlike faith drives this persistence.¹

Jesus' logic is clear. If imperfect earthly parents respond to their children's requests, how much more will our heavenly Father give all sorts of good things to his children when they ask him? However, as every toddler knows instinctively, tantrums do not really work on strangers. Fervent prayer does not work if we are not in fact God's children. It matters if we are approaching God as our Father and if we have a real relationship with him. Otherwise, no matter how fervently we may be praying, how loudly we may be screaming and stomping our feet, we should not expect much of a response from God. Ironically, if we are to learn to pray, we must make it less about praying and more about God's relationship with us. Overemphasizing the practice of prayer and ignoring the relationship with God

¹ Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009), 39

leads to what Timothy Keller calls “the tragedy of untethered prayer.”² Andrew Murray reflects:

The Lord would remind us that the prayer of a child owes its influence entirely to the relation in which he stands to the parent. The prayer can exert that influence only when the child is really living in that relationship, in the home, in the love, in the service of the Father. The power of the promise, ‘Ask and it shall be given you,’ lies in the loving relationship between us as children and the Father in heaven; when we live and walk in that relationship, the prayer of faith and its answer will be the natural result.... Live as a child of God, then you will be able to pray as a child, and as a child you will most assuredly be heard.³

In response to the disciples’ request to teach them to pray, Jesus says: *Pray like this: “Our Father in heaven...”* (Matthew 6:9). It is a unique privilege of Christ’s followers to call God “Father.” The one who commands us to pray to God as our Father is the one who has brought us into God’s family. We have been adopted by God *through Jesus Christ* (Ephesians 1:5). He is the perfectly obedient Son whose sacrifice on our behalf allows us to participate in the blessings of belonging to God’s household. This is why Christians begin their prayers with “Our Father” and end with “In Jesus’ name.” Our experience of Christ is inextricable from our experience of God as our Father. As J.I. Packer says, “What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father.”⁴

Christ’s work of adoption is not merely transactional. It is also transformational. In a parallel passage in Luke, Jesus says: *If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* (Luke 11:13). The Father’s greatest gift to his children is his Spirit. It is he who transforms us into God’s children based on Jesus’ accomplishments in our place. The third person of the Trinity is called the Spirit of adoption who enables us to experience the Father’s love and convinces us that he is a Father who delights in giving his children good gifts. The Spirit enables us to cry, *Abba! Father!* as we pray (Romans 8:15). His work is to keep convincing us to relate to God by grace as our Father through Christ. Timothy Keller writes:

² Timothy Keller, *Prayer* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 60

³ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), 37

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 1993), 200

The Spirit gives believers an existential, inward certainty that their relationship with God does not now depend on their performance as it does in the relationship between an employee and a supervisor. It depends on parental love. The Holy Spirit takes a theological proposition and turns it into an inner confidence and joy. You know that God responds to your cry with the intense love and care of a parent responding to the cry of pain of his or her child – because you are in Jesus, the true Son. You can go to God with the confidence of receiving that kind of attention and love. Put another way, the Holy Spirit gives us a confident faith that turns naturally into prayer.⁵

If we are to learn to pray fervently, we must approach God as children approach their parents. We must ask in Jesus' name because it is only because of what he has done that we can be part of God's family. And we must respond to the Spirit's work of teaching us to ask like God's children. As John Bunyan says, "When the Spirit gets into the heart, then there is prayer indeed, and not till then."⁶

ACTION POINTS

- Address God as Father, Papa, or Daddy in your prayers.
- Ask the Spirit to teach you how to ask fervently as a child of God.
- Continue using the prayer journal to register God's responses to your prayers.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Prayer* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 71

⁶ John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2005), 32